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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 001831

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SUBJECT: TURKEY: AKP EYES SECULAR STRONGHOLD OF IZMIR IN
MARCH 2009 LOCAL ELECTIONS

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

1. (C) Summary and comment: The Aegean jewel of Izmir, Turkey's third largest city, is at the heart of the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP's) quest to dominate March 2009 local elections by besting its July 2007 parliamentary election performance, when it captured 47 percent of the nationwide vote. The well-organized and politically savvy AKP is targeting Izmir's poor and growing middle class areas in its effort to defeat the incumbent Republican People's Party (CHP) metropolitan mayor and dramatically increase AKP seats in the provincial general assembly and municipal assemblies. CHP leaders, citing a recent regional poll that put CHP support at 62 percent and AKP's 25 percent, are confident Izmir's "western-oriented voters" will re-elect the CHP mayor and hand AKP a resounding all-around defeat. Opposition Nationalist Action Party (MHP), portraying itself as the party that will unite Izmir, seeks a dark-horse victory. Several civil society and business leaders told us CHP is overconfident given the two decades of high immigration to Izmir that has steadily tipped the demographic scale in AKP's favor. These contacts believe corruption allegations against AKP will help CHP retain the metropolitan mayorship but will not prevent AKP from performing strongly in other races. Though recent national polls have shown a drop in AKP support, Prime Minister Erdogan's party has proved before that it cannot be underestimated at this stage in an electoral race. End summary and comment.

CHP's Social Democratic Stronghold at Stake

2. (C) During a recent visit to Izmir, a city that is as well known for its progressive nature and history of social tolerance as for its proximity to breathtaking beaches, Kadir Sivaci, editor-in-chief of the regional newspaper "Yeni Asir," described why the city is a key battleground in March 2009 local elections. Sivaci told us that the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) has held the Izmir metropolitan municipal mayorship for the past decade and believes the city is a "fortress of social democracy" that AKP will never fully breach. AKP sees the Izmir mayorship as eminently winnable because it has been undergoing fundamental demographic and social change as immigrants from traditionally conservative Anatolian cities move to the city. AKP believes that if it successfully taps into this voter base it can defeat CHP in its last political stronghold, according to Savici. At the same time, AKP believes that by

winning Izmir and the three other metropolitan municipalities (cities with more than 750,000 residents) it has yet to win -- Diyarbakir, Mersin, and Eskisehir -- it will demonstrate it represents all of Turkey.

¶3. (C) Amnesty International Izmir President Taner Kilic told us there are two Izmir: the coastal area dominated by CHP supporters and the inland area made up of the poor and middle class immigrants. AKP had made major gains in Izmir in 2004 local elections and 2007 parliamentary elections by skillfully targeting the inland residents. In 2004, AKP won 32 percent of the provincial general assembly vote, compared to CHP's 35 percent. In 2007 AKP pulled even with CHP when each party won 9 of Izmir's 24 parliamentary seats (MHP won 4 and DSP 2). By again focusing its campaign on the growing number of residents who compose the inland region, Kilic believes AKP will perform well in elections for the provincial general assembly, municipal assemblies, and sub-provincial mayorships.

CHP Brimming With Confidence in Izmir

¶4. (C) CHP Izmir Provincial Chairman Kemal Karatas told us CHP will hold Izmir, a province it has dominated politically for the past decade. Recounting how Izmir residents showed their "strong opposition to AKP during patriotic rallies" in the lead up to 2007 presidential and parliamentary elections, he predicted CHP would easily win the metropolitan mayorship. Karatas said he felt "relaxed and comfortable" following an

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October 15 KONDA poll that showed 62 percent of Izmir voters would support CHP, 25.7 percent AKP, 6.3 percent MHP, and 6 percent other parties. (Comment: the KONDA poll distributes undecided voters based on a prediction of how they will vote, a common but dubious statistical method used in many Turkish polls. End comment.) He is also confident CHP will increase the party's seats in the provincial general assembly, municipal assemblies, and win at least 28 of 30 sub-provincial mayorships. (Note: CHP currently holds 18 of 28. Recent GOT legislation that CHP is challenging in the Constitutional court created two new sub-provinces. End note.) CHP Deputy Provincial Chairman Mahmut Ozcift assured us CHP would win all 30.

¶5. (C) Karatas explained that Izmir is a "western-oriented social democratic province" where voters are most concerned with maintaining the progressive character of the city. Deputy Mayor Ali Karaman told us that the unique social democratic outlook of Izmir voters, combined with greater media exposure of AKP corruption, will assure CHP a strong victory, "even if AKP uses its favorite tactic of wooing poor voters by handing out food, coal, and other financial incentives." Karatas allowed that "there is always a chance of a surprise." But he believes AKP's involvement in corruption, a weak economy, and the secular nature of Izmir would lead to AKP's resounding defeat in Izmir.

AKP Strategically Targeting Izmir's Growing Middle Class

¶6. (C) AKP Izmir Provincial Chairman Aydin Sengul told us performing well in Izmir is a critical part of AKP's strategy to improve on its tremendous success in July 2007 national elections. From the party's office in a industrial middle-class area of town, Sengul told us CHP naively perceives Izmir as its political fortress. He noted that two center-right parties -- the True Path Party (DYP) and the Motherland Party (ANAP) -- had governed the metropolitan municipality during the 1980's and 1990's. According to Sengul, Izmir voters showed that they recognized CHP had poorly managed the city, by sharply criticizing the mayor's failure to lower the high level of arsenic in the water

supply. AKP plans to tap into this voter discontent, as well as the high number of immigrants who have come to Izmir from Anatolia during the past decade, Sengul said.

¶17. (C) Sengul told us AKP's primary goal is to win the metropolitan mayorship so that it can control the purse strings necessary to improve the provision of public services. Winning would also demonstrate Izmir voters understand AKP is working for all of Turkey and has no "hidden agenda." Sengul said AKP's secondary goal is to surpass its provincial general assembly vote total in 2004 local elections, when it received 32 percent to CHP's 35 percent. AKP views the provincial general assembly elections as a *refereundum* on its rule because "Turks vote for these bodies based on a party's national governance," according to Sengul. AKP also hopes to more than double the seven sub-provincial mayoral seats it holds in Izmir's 30 sub-provinces, and significantly increase its presence in municipal assemblies, where it currently holds approximately 35 percent of seats compared to CHP's 45 percent. Noting the importance voters attribute to candidates' personalities in local elections, Sengul said he and his team are carefully vetting candidates.

¶18. (C) Sengul was unfazed by the low numbers in the KONDA poll. He thought these may reflect temporary voter uncertainty after recent PKK terrorist attacks, the global economic crisis, and allegations over AKP corruption. Though AKP's own internal polls show AKP is doing much better than the KONDA poll suggests, Sengul said he believes it is too early for any polls to serve as a reliable indicator. The ultimate result, he believes, depends on how well AKP can tap into the poor and growing middle class voter base and counter the attacks expected to consistently come from media outlets loyal to CHP.

MHP Comfortable With Dark Horse Status

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¶19. (C) MHP Provincial Chairman Musavat Dervisoglu told us his party would pull off a surprise victory by capitalizing on voter dissatisfaction with AKP and CHP. Dervisoglu, the front-runner to be MHP's candidate for metropolitan mayor, said Izmir voters were fed up with the local CHP administration's failure to deliver on promises of clean water and better highways. He said voter support for AKP had dropped because the Deniz Feneri (Lighthouse) scandal had caused voters to "wake up" to the extent of AKP corruption and the party's failure to adequately address PKK terrorism. Dervisoglu also noted that AKP underestimated the extent to which the global economic crisis will hit a Turkish economy that already has high unemployment, a large current account deficit, and that is "built on speculation."

¶10. (C) Izmir voters recognize that CHP and AKP are pursuing divisive tactic of targeting only segments of Izmir voters, according to Dervisoglu. MHP will explain that it is the only party that will unite all Izmir residents behind the "common Turkish values" that is the party's mantra. The dozen energized deputies who joined Dervisoglu in our meeting told us they are determined to carry out an extensive door-to-door public outreach campaign to explain MHP's policies and commitment, and to overcome the lack of deep pockets and media connections possessed by AKP and CHP.

Personalities and National Policies Key

¶11. (C) "Yeni Asir's" Savici told us Izmir voters follow the nationwide pattern of placing great importance on the personalities of candidates in local elections but are somewhat unique because they also give great weight to a party's national platform and performance. Savici said the

focus on national issues was demonstrated by Izmir voters continuing support of CHP despite the mayor's lackluster performance in dealing with the issues of polluted water and highway construction. Jak Kaya, a prominent businessman who also leads Izmir's Jewish community, agreed that voters will focus on personalities and the party's performance on the important issues of the day: terrorism, corruption, and the economy.

¶12. (C) Kaya, a friend and supporter of the mayor told us CHP will win the metropolitan mayorship but that the race will be much tighter than the KONDA poll suggests. He believes Izmir's changing demography ensures AKP will perform well in the races for the provincial general assembly, municipal assemblies, and sub-provincial mayorships. Savici too expects AKP to perform much better than the KONDA poll predicts. He told us the corruption scandals that had hurt AKP in recent national polls would affect Izmir local elections as well, but cautioned that it is much too early to count out "a well-organized AKP that is determined to win Izmir."

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